

THE TEACHER AND
THE PUPIL

by

RUKMINI DEVI

EDITED BY THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE
OF THE BESANT CULTURAL CENTRE

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I wonder to what extent people realise that the foundation of all our work is in education. We all lecture, talk and write in order to affect the minds of people in some way but do not realise that those who can most easily be changed are the young. We take so much trouble to change adults and when we find no response in them, are disheartened and wonder what we must do. There is one answer to that question which every Theosophist should think about, because it is the one and only solution. It is Education. For Theosophists, I would add "theosophical" education; theosophical in the larger sense of the word — not trying to make the young into formal Theosophists, but in the sense of giving right education. Personally, I do not think there ought to be any Lodge any group of idealists, who do not do some work, at least, along educational lines, without doing something for children, because children are the best material. If every spiritually minded person considers himself an artist, with what sort of material would he like to paint his picture, or what sort of instrument would he like on which to play his music? Surely he would want some medium which would be easy for him to work with. Therefore, for those who would work for humanity in some direct way, the easiest thing of all is to work with youth and above all with childhood. The young are easy only for those who can understand youth, who really love young people, not for those who only think they must love them. A large number of us belong to the latter type and that is why our work for youth is not successful. Really to love the young is the first and greatest of all qualifications for educating them. The second requirement is not to have forgotten one's own youth. Many people have. They always say from generation to generation that those who have grown old do not understand the young and yet it is strange that the very ones that complain, when they become old, are not able to understand their younger generation. The reason is that they have forgotten their youth. If we can remember what we were all like then, what reactions we had, we can understand youth and, even more, we can remain young. Some people ask how to remain youthful even in the advent of age. The best of all treatments is always to enjoy the company of the young. I have met some of the greatest educationists in the world and

they have all been youthful. In fact they have been almost like children. Madame Montessori as a person when she was nearly eighty one, was one of the most youthful human beings I had ever come across. One could easily have said that she was eighty years young. It is the same with many others whom I have seen working with children, because being in the company of children has given them a new outlook, a new experience, so that they are eternally alive and youthful in the right sense of the term. This is the great secret of youth.

So we must begin to educate from a fundamental point of view. Many people begin either keeping in mind only what are the latest modern developments in education or what the great psychologists say. I do not find much glamour just in the words 'modern' or 'new' alone. I do not mean that I do not believe in anything new because I do, but I think we sometimes consider that anything new is progressive. Now, everything new is *not* progressive, because all depends on how something is new and what is the origin of the newness. It may come from the mind or from what I might call the creative spirit which is much higher than the mind or the emotions. It is only that which originates in this spirit that can touch the world of reality, of evolution, of movement and of renewing life. Once we touch that creative power we are new, not because we want to be, but because we cannot help it. From a certain point of view, there is nothing new at all in the world. Some of the latest things they speak of in the West, can be read of in the ancient Sanskrit books written a few thousand years ago. I can tell you this — not from theory, but from my experience in Art.

My new motto in life is: "Educate the educator". That is what we want. One of my programmes is to give an idea of culture as part of the educating the educated. Sometimes I have given lectures before great Sanskrit scholars and very learned people, and they have asked me to demonstrate to them what has been said in the ancient textbooks on the dance. I have told them that I would not be able to quote from the ancient books as I was not learned, but that I would speak of my own experience in Art, and demonstrate that which I have discovered myself. If there were any ancient passages that would fit my experience, then I would request them to give the references. Indeed we found that what I spoke of and demonstrated from my own personal discovery had been anticipated and spoken of in those old classics. It was a wonderful discovery for me to find that experience is essentially one. This is an important thing that we have to realise. The tradition of experience that goes side by side with the experience of another — not the make believe of another — is what I call Truth.

It is through personal and individual experience, through work, through creative activity that we discover the Truth. That is the only way in which to approach education, because what the educationists say is less important than our own experience with the child, which we have to put side by side with the experience of others. We must discover how far the person who writes books on education really loves children. If we love children and work with them, we know whether the educationists loved children or whether they just loved education as an idea.

When I was speaking at the UNESCO, during the Educational Conference, I said that we had all spoken about Education because we love Education, but that we had forgotten one thing: that the person to be loved is the one to be educated and not education itself as such. We have a tendency sometimes to get absorbed by the idea alone and forget human values and the human side. So our greatest educator is the Child. We must remember that we are not educating the child, but that the Child is educating us. He is teaching us what to teach him. We have preconceived ideas. We say: We must teach the child this or that, we must train him to be this, that or the other, but our ideas of training him must change because we have in front of us a creative artist who is changing all the time. That creative artist is the Child. He expands us to new ideas, we become renewed because of him and thus make new discoveries. Take for instance the Montessori Method. I remember Madame Montessori telling me that one of her great sorrows was that even those trained by her saw only the method and not the spirit behind it. How very true, I thought. It is the Montessori spirit we want and not so much the method — not that the method is wrong, it can be creative too — but if we stagnate and become immersed in the method, then, two hundred years hence, we will still be using those little materials and shall have become slaves to the method forgetting the purpose for which it was invented. So, if we are true to the spirit of real education, we must make it creative. The only right person to be a teacher is obviously the one alone who can love not only the work as such, but him for whom the work is performed. If a teacher cannot do this, obviously, he must find other work to do.

Let us look back and see how the great Sages have spoken of the profession of a teacher. At one time it was considered that only one person was fit to be a teacher — the noblest person in the land, the greatest person — not one who strives for high positions. No one could become a teacher who was not able to teach with his personality, not only with method and ability. We may have knowledge, ability, love;

but more than that, we must teach in other ways than by obvious teaching. The majority of us learn more than we think when we are not formally learning. When we are asked to learn something we do not learn so much. But when we forget about it and enjoy observing something, we begin to absorb that something into ourselves. Children especially, learn more outside the class room than in it. Therefore, when we think of education, school alone is not sufficient. The home and the school have to go hand in hand. Everyone recognises nowadays that the first seven years of the child are the foundation for the rest of his life. One of the greatest of Teachers, the Manu, has said: "Let a child be with his mother for the first seven years." Now we have Montessori schools where there are children within that age, but in the ancient days the Montessori school was in the home: the Montessori teacher was the mother. By her love for the child, she created the individual. From the age of seven onwards, the child went to his teacher. And what was the school? What should be the school? The school should be an extension of the home. We do not go from the home to the school, we can bring the school to the home from the time a child is born. The whole atmosphere is thus a continuity through life, and the student learns that he never stops learning. This is where the art of teaching comes in. When he knows that learning is a process without end then he is fit to be a citizen of the world. There is a story of a great Teacher who had a student who learnt everything from him. The student was brilliant. At last the teacher said: "I don't know what more to teach you," and the student answered: "I have learnt everything from you and now I am ready to go out into the world." The teacher replied: "Yes, you may if you feel that you have learnt." So the student departed, but when he went and found himself in the world, he discovered that there was one thing he had not learnt, namely, humility. So he came back to his teacher and said: "I have not finished my learning, will you accept me again as your pupil?" and then the teacher blessed him and said: "Now you have learnt the lesson, you may go out into the world." So it was only when he had learnt the lesson of humility that he had finished his education and that is the essence of learning. We have therefore, to have a clear perception of what is education.

It has been said many times that education is the drawing down of the soul into outer expression. Dr. Arundale once used a phrase: "The teacher is a messenger between the soul and the body." In our heydays of educational work, when we used to have many exhibitions and lectures, certain phases that were used have remained in my mind. One of these was: "If you want to teach Krishna mathematics, you must not

only know mathematics, you must also know Krishna'. So, let us remember that the root of education is in the knowledge of the child, of the student. And how do we obtain that knowledge? That is where the great teaching of Theosophy comes in. We know that the individual who is in front of us has not merely come into the world for the first time. He brings something with him and it is for us to intuit what are the talents, the weakness, the emotions, the mind that he brings with him and it is only when we understand this, that we will know what to teach him. Because surely we should know what *he* wants to learn. But usually, we decide what *we* want to teach and we never seek to find out what he wants to learn for the child cannot answer in any usually understood language. So we think he is dull and we must thrust on him all the knowledge that we have. Ninety times out of a hundred, our subconscious idea of education is to make the child exactly like ourselves, because subconsciously we think that *we* are perfect beings. We must give him right education. Why? Because we are the right persons to give it. We have the best ideas in the world and have read the best books and we know — unfortunately others do not know.

What a thing it is to be a teacher! we have to be spiritual individuals. We have to be yogis to be teachers, because we have to remove ourselves from the picture. The one person who should not exist in a class room is the teacher and when he is actually there, he must not be there so to speak. So the abolition of oneself is the foundation of right teaching. If we forget ourselves and then remember the child a little more than we generally do, we will begin to know what he wants. Remember that to find out what he wants is a very big piece of work. How can we achieve this knowledge? We can only achieve it in one way — as in many other things — by meditation, by meditating upon the child, Let us not therefore go and sit cross-legged before him, but let us try to enter completely into his consciousness, to feel as he does, to discover the meaning of his actions and his words, to feel with our sensitiveness, and then somehow, little by little, by our daily meditation on the child — on the child in front of us, *not* the child in general — we shall find out what he wants. We love children in general, but it is necessary to love *the* child, the particular child that has come to us. As the child changes, our meditation must be renewed and then only shall we begin to discover what he wants to know and we shall begin to equip ourselves to teach him. No diploma in a training college alone is going to equip us for this. In a college we shall learn subjects, but not that particular quality of meditation, because when we have learnt everything and discovered a particular child and have taught him, a new problem is pre-

sented with the next child that comes to us for education and we have to discover what *he* needs. We discover also that we do not know how to teach him what he needs and so we begin to learn. We become learners every day. We go on learning in order to go on teaching and we go on discovering so as to give that discovery to the child. We can now understand why the teacher was called the noblest individual and why teaching was considered the noblest profession. When we teach, we have created the world, we have changed the world, we have started the building of a new world, and if we have successfully taught that child, remember what he is going to make of his country and of the world to-morrow. Every teacher is thus made tremendously responsible, with a very noble and spiritual mission.

In all this, we should use the many things created around us. Unfortunately we do not do so. We forget the emotion of the child. At first the child learns unconsciously. Then he begins to learn consciously and our method of teaching must change accordingly. Up to a point, the whole of humanity learns unconsciously far more than we realise. When I speak of absorbing knowledge, this is done not by racking our brains and learning; we seem to learn through all our senses: through our intelligence, our emotions, our sensitiveness, our fingers, our eyes and our ears. We absorb the life around us and finally that becomes knowledge or whatever name we like to call it. During this period of life it is most important to provide the learner with all the things in the environment which the five senses should absorb. At this time, Art and beauty are the most vital things for harmonious growth because then we are laying the foundation of the culture of the human being. We all talk about culture; we work for art and want people to be cultured, but how much hard work it entails to make education culture centred. We want to give music to those who can intelligently understand music, but we forget to give music to those who can unconsciously absorb it, namely to children. Art has therefore an important and essential place in education — in the home, outside the home, in the class room, in everything. Not only must we teach Art, but we must teach *through* Art. This we do not realise. We teach literature — but if only we can make the student understand the beauty of literature, then automatically the rest will follow of itself. Unfortunately, we concentrate upon the brain, we want to pump knowledge into it and as a consequence the brain becomes over-developed or under-developed as the case may be. Therefore, we do not have a balanced human being. Every individual is emotional by inherent nature but we do not provide education for the emotions. First of all, we do not know the science of the emotions. Of course we quote modern

psychologists. I think modern psychology is very interesting, but it is based on preconceived ideas. It is dependent on human reactions. It tries to find out not what we are, but what we express, instead of *why* we express certain things. It does not discover the root-cause nor attempts to go back to the source, whereas ideas must come from the source and work outwards. This is the difference between ancient and modern psychology. I believe a time will come when we will begin to see the need for that approach from within, and not treat the symptoms but their cause.

If we understand this point of view, we begin to see that every child comes into the world with a certain atmosphere of heavenly Beauty and waits to absorb the heaven that is without. But we do not give him that heaven, but only hell so to speak. Because we do not give him that beauty, what happens is that his emotions do not develop hand in hand with his mind and therefore the mind becomes dominant. As we know, the human mind has now become a destructive force in the world. A constructive potency lies in the development of the emotions. Emotion is the cause of action, of activity. Activity comes from impulse, from feeling. We find among children a tremendous amount of activity, very often uncontrolled activity, because they do not know how to control their energies and misdirect them. This is called mischief, unruliness, lack of discipline, etc. So we say that we must discipline the young. How are we to do this? One of the greatest of disciplining forces is Art, because Art is a Harmoniser. To learn a particular Art is a discipline in itself. It is a disciplining of energy which will create something. Energy is not wasted, so that whether it is dance, or music, or painting, an outlet of creative expression results. Immediately there is satisfaction, joy, inspiration, harmony. We even discover that an individual can often completely change in such an environment. From the time that a child is born, there must be the atmosphere of beauty around him. In this respect, we can learn a few things from other nations. In Japan, so I am told, they had a marvellous tradition. When grown-ups quarrelled, they would immediately retire to a room where there were no children so as not to utter a harsh word in front of them, because they were greatly afraid that the children might learn a bad lesson from watching their elders. We must remember that we influence children not only by what we teach but by what we are. So, in Japan, they made a great policy of keeping the children happy surrounding them with beauty and grace. We can lift humanity to a higher level by providing means for that development, and if we do so, not only will humanity change, but a finer type of people will be born into the world.

This is the real nature of education. This is the external part of it. The internal part is the relationship between the teacher and the taught; that tremendous link, that loving spirit which completely enfolds the two — whether the teacher be the mother or a teacher in school. But towards that end which includes the training of the emotions, must come the teaching of Art. Why? Because we must keep human beings human. Now we are called human beings, but we are not all human, if you understand what I mean. What does the word 'human' mean? It means beings with hearts, that is all. Therefore we need now the education of the heart. People understand the education of the mind, but not the education of the heart, and to achieve that we need Art, because Art is the refiner of the emotions. When I speak of Art, I mean *real* Art. Nowadays we have to speak of real and unreal Art; of real Religion and unreal Religion; of real brotherhood and unreal brotherhood. I speak about *real* Art that elevates, inspires, and uplifts. We need it so that we can still have hearts though we have grown up. We have to grow up keeping that fine emotion, with all that sensitiveness, that grace and beauty that exist in a child. We often kill these. Children usually have better taste than grown-ups because in them, taste is an instinct; they cannot argue about it, they just have taste, that is all. But we kill natural taste in children by wrong education. We need the purifying and spiritualising influence of beauty in order that the individual can become a great citizen of the world. Wherever the mind and the emotions go side by side, they make the perfect individual and we must work for that. When I say 'perfect', I do not say we can be perfect, but greatness, beauty of living, can be achieved.

There are three aspects of education which I consider important. First Art and beauty, secondly Religion, thirdly Love. It may be said that religious education already exists in various countries. But when I say 'Religion' I do not mean any particular Religion or anything sectarian, but that spirit that makes one feel that there is something to live for, an ideal which one sets before oneself towards which one attempts to grow. This is the spirit which is behind Religion and Religions. Why do we need that spirit? We need it because one of the things that humanity is suffering from today is selfishness. Selfishness is, I think, the root-cause of our troubles — nothing else. Why is it that we have become more selfish in this Kali Yuga? It has happened because we have become gods in our own eyes. When we say we do not look up to God or anything else, what happens? We say: let us be ourselves, our ideas are the most important; nothing else matters. Subconsciously we mean "We are the ultimate, everything is 'I' or 'We'". We must get rid of the 'I' from

education and therefore we must abolish ourselves and have before ourselves a vision towards which we move, and as we reach near we humble ourselves before that which is greater than us. In India we call this reverence. Reverence means we are humble because we recognise greatness. We have forgotten ourselves because we remember something else. Reverence to nature, to life, to greatness, to truth, to beauty — that is the essential spirit of Religion.

The third important aspect of education is always to emphasise that finally there is only one thing that is of value, however learned we may be, however great we are, and that is our love for others, our love for all creatures, our love for humanity — in fact Love itself. Ultimately, that is the only thing that is of value, and we must do everything to educate people and children to retain that love. That is why I do a great deal in my school to make children feel for the animals and the birds, because that is all part of the reverence for life. They naturally love animals. Children, in the beginning, love animals more than human beings — except perhaps their mothers and fathers — because animals are much more in their own environment of naturalness, simplicity and beauty. This environment is the common language they can speak with one another. We must keep that sympathy, keep that love because love for the smallest creature will surely be the love for the life of *all* and the love for the younger kingdoms of nature will certainly lead to the love of everything else.

I will finish with the great ideal that the Lord Vaivasvata Manu, one of the greatest Teachers of India, put before the students, in what He called the Forest Universities — Forest Universities because nature was understood to be an important factor in education. We speak about Art and beauty, but what greater Art, what greater beauty is there than in Nature? The first object of education according to Him, is Service. The second object is Study, because study is for service. The third object is the achievement of simplicity and self-control — not discipline in the sense of asking the child to do what we tell him, but making him understand what he wants to tell himself. This is true discipline. The final result will be the development of the complete individual, who can truly be a citizen of the world, a citizen who has not merely mastered the mind, has acquired knowledge but even more, has become an individual with a capital 'I'. It will be such an individual who will save the world — not the group of mass mentalities, but the individual who is part of the universal Self. But the universe is not outside himself, it is inside himself, and with that realisation finally he becomes an individual who will help the world and lift it to a great level of civilisation.

AUTHOR

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